

This article was published in *History in Africa* 46 (2019)

From Metropole to Margin in *UNESCO's General History of Africa* – The Documents of Historiographical Decolonization in Paris and Ibadan

Larissa Schulte Nordholt

Abstract: This archival research report details the uses and disuses of UNESCO's Paris archives of its *General History of Africa*. By looking in detail at what African historians have been doing as well as writing, we can reach a better understanding of the reality of African history writing in the immediate postcolonial era. That means taking into account the complexity of the archive; and using J.F. Ade-Ajayi's archive in Ibadan as an example we can see that the vast Paris collection of material relating to the writing of the *General History of Africa* is complemented by documents scattered across different archives.

Biographical-Sketch: Larissa Schulte Nordholt is a PhD candidate at the institute for History, Leiden University. She is currently working on a PhD thesis on the historiography of UNESCO's *General History of Africa/L'Histoire générale de l'Afrique* (1964–1999). E-mail: l.r.c.schulte.nordholt@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Introduction: What Use Are the *General History of Africa* Dossiers?

Undeniably, UNESCO is connected to African historiography. From 1964 until 1999 the organization funded and published the eight-volume *General History of Africa/L'Histoire Générale de l'Afrique*. It also provided funds for the recording of oral traditions and worked to collect valuable information on existing archives

about Africa.¹ Somewhat ironically then, the archives thus recount part of the story of the methodological innovation of oral tradition, and literature, as sources for African history. The intention was to replace archival testimony, or at least to challenge and augment it. Importantly, UNESCO became convinced that the postcolonial world needed a history of its own in order to become a self-determining part of the global world order.²

The creation of historiography began with UNESCO's *History of Mankind*, which had been the brainchild of Julian Huxley. Huxley's vision for UNESCO had been one of cosmopolitanism and intellectual cooperation among great statesmen and the *History of Mankind* was to be a history of human progress. Huxley espoused universalist ideals of the unity of humanity,³ but his was a universalism that could be identified as a form of Western, or European, particularism.⁴ The idea lasted within UNESCO that peace would best be secured not only through political and economic cooperation, but must be built on intellectual and moral solidarity.⁵ However, over the years the utopian approach shifted towards pragmatism focused on technical assistance and utility, for instance in the service of the collection of oral traditions. UNESCO then changed from a cosmopolitan association of great men to become an intergovernmental grouping of nation states, in which all nations were vaguely equal.⁶ Moreover, UNESCO was influenced by the French

¹ The results of which have been published in nine different "Guides to the Sources of the History of Africa," such as: Sayyid Akbarali Ibrahimali Tirmizi, *Indian Sources for African History* (Delhi: International Writers Emporium/UNESCO, 1988).

² Fernando Valderrama, *A History of UNESCO* (Paris: UNESCO, 1995), 308, 317, 328, 348, 374.

³ Lynn Meskell, *A Future in Ruins. UNESCO, World Heritage and the Dream of Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) 1–3.

⁴ Chloé Maurel, "L'histoire générale de l'Afrique de l'UNESCO. Un projet coopération intellectuelle transnationale d'esprit afro-centré (1964-1999)," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 54 (2014), 715–737, 720; Sunil Amrith and Glenda Sluga, "New Histories of the United Nations," *Journal of World History* 19–3 (2008), 251–274.

⁵ Meskell, *A Future in Ruins*, 27.

⁶ Meskell, *A Future in Ruins*, 226.

anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and his notions of cultural relativity and the intrinsic value of diversity.⁷ The decision of the 13th UNESCO general conference in 1964 that a *General History of Africa* should be drafted can be seen in the light of the promotion of intellectual and cultural diversity, especially since the *General History* was the first of a number of such history projects.⁸

This Archive Report puts forth the idea that the UNESCO archives can be used for more than the study of International Organizations and International Relations. UNESCO cannot itself be seen as an actor, for it is rather an organization established by individuals and, in the context of African historiography, used by African historians as a means to an end. The organization became a way to launch not only individual careers but also the African academy. Many meetings and specialized seminars for *General History*'s took place in Africa, which facilitated the exchange of ideas and opinions. Throughout the 1960s and until the 1980s UNESCO allowed African historians and other “third world” (or “global south”) actors to explore non-alignment and satisfy local political needs. That was possible due both to the Afro-Asian power-bloc that had manifested itself within the UN and the global politics of the Cold War.⁹ African historians were able to appear on the world stage and utilize UNESCO to their own advantage, for example by “Africanizing” African history, decolonizing it and providing the new nation states with a historical rationale in the form of *The General History of Africa*. So it was that UNESCO – or rather the officials and scholars making use of the organization – was responsible for the establishment and enlargement of an academic infrastructure geared towards historical research on Africa. The UNESCO archives can therefore be used to trace the intellectual

⁷ Amrith and Sluga, “New Histories of the United Nations”, 258; Meskell, *A Future in Ruins*, 23.

⁸ UNESCO later also sponsored the drafting and publication of a number of other general history projects, such as the *General History of Latin America* and the *General History of the Caribbean*.

⁹ Evan Luard, *A History of the United Nations*, volume 2 (*The Age of Decolonization, 1955–1965*) (London: MacMillan, 1989), 254.

history of post-war African scholarship as it modelled itself on western templates.

Access and Use of the Archive¹⁰

The UNESCO archives in Paris therefore offer a collection of material bound to attract the attention of anyone interested in the historiography and intellectual history of Africa during the 1960's, 1970's, and 1980's. The creation of new African historiography during that period may best be understood through an analysis of both its output and the messiness inherent in the writing of any history. The creation of this historiography entailed a synthesis of new ideals and practices of what it means to "do" history and to "be" a historian. It is therefore crucial to look primarily at the everyday decisions the authors and editors made in order to produce the *GHA*, thus integrating examination of official documents with looking at smaller-scale historiographical material such as scribbled notes, scraps of paper carefully or randomly saved, and letters. Together such documents are what can allow a fuller picture to be pieced together.

Fortunately, UNESCO has published online the majority of the official documents related to the *General History of Africa*, making it easier for anyone interested in the *General History* to develop a sense of the project. That is by no means in fact an unnecessary luxury, as the index of archival documents presented upon arrival in Paris is somewhat less straightforward. For anyone not directly familiar with UNESCO's organization there can be a certain amount of guesswork as to what archival materials are actually to be found in the UNESCO boxes. Fortunately, the archivists working at UNESCO have prepared a very convenient

¹⁰ I spent from October 2016 until June 2017 working in the archives at Place de Fontenoy and Rue Miollis, researching the history and historiography of the *General History of Africa*. My research focused on the everyday activities of African scholars shortly after decolonization. I was interested in the strategies used to achieve the intellectual aim of the *General History of Africa*: to decolonize or Africanize the history of Africa.

finding aid for researchers interested in the *General History of Africa*.¹¹

The material in the UNESCO archives relating to the *General History of Africa* is divided into Secretariat Documents, General Conference and Executive Documents, Publications, and Archival Series and Files. Those latter are the most interesting, as most, although not all, the other documents can be found online. In their turn the Archival Series and Files are further divided into categories of which the two most important are the Cultural Studies and Circulation division (CC/CSP) and the Division of International Cultural Cooperation (CLT/CID). All the files are freely accessible and easy to request. The CC/CSP and CLT/CID files are to be found in the archive annex at Rue Miollis, although certain of the so-called subject files, containing material from various *General History of Africa* seminars and expert-meetings, are housed at Place de Fontenoy. As any UNESCO archivist will tell you, the best way to go about any research concerning the *General History* is first to study some of the secretariat files online through the UNESCO website. After acquainting oneself with, for instance, the broad outline of the *General History*, it is best to make an appointment with an archivist, who will help you go through the *General History of Africa* search aid, so you can decide which files to call for first. The archives at Place de Fontenoy are open to visitors from 2 until 5pm and the first appointment should be made during those hours. You will then be allowed to leave the boxes you are working on ready in the UNESCO library to continue working on them the following morning. The annex archive at Rue Miollis is open from 9.30 am until 12.30 pm and there are digital and hardcopy index lists available showing which files exist for each series. The somewhat obscure and official naming of certain files makes it difficult to work out which might be the most useful ones for your particular research purposes, especially for researchers less well-acquainted with UN terminology. The indexes contain short descriptions of

¹¹ UNESCO Archives, "Finding Aid to Sources in the UNESCO Archives on the *General History of Africa* (Focus on Phase I)," 7 March 2012, revised 29 May 2012, revised 9 September 2014, revised 16 December 2015.

what is in each box, although not all descriptions are entirely accurate and some are very condensed. Fortunately it is relatively easy to call for two or three boxes at a time so that it is feasible to sift a large amount of material quickly in search of the best nuggets of information.

The Entrails of the Archive

The material in the archives on the *General History of Africa* can of course be used to augment what is already to be found online. Whereas the online material contains the official minutes of meetings and seminars and the papers published as a result of them, the archival materials are much more personal and illustrate the complexities of writing and editing an eight-volume work of history, as well as proceedings of seminars. It is through that sort of entanglement that the historian can construct the reality of historical research work. By sifting through correspondence, comments on chapters and complaints going back and forth, it is often possible to build up a feeling of the everyday experience of history writing in the immediate postcolonial era. Considering that it took more than thirty years to write the *General History* it is most interesting to see which historians played only peripheral roles and who remained committed to the project throughout.

Moreover, the archive contains material relating to the personal lives of some of the pioneers of African history, men and women who were public intellectuals on the continent and further afield. More than a few African historians spent part of their careers working for UNESCO, such as Bethwell Ogot, the Kenyan historian and specialist in non-centralized oral traditions, who served as president of the organizations' General Conference from 1991 until 1993 and played a leading role in the *General History*.¹² Amadou Hampaté Bâ and Jan Vansina were two other famous specialists on oral traditions who were familiar with the organization. Hampaté Bâ in fact worked for UNESCO throughout the 1960s and

¹² Bethwell Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time* (Kisumu: Ayange Press Limited, 2003), 383–399, 419.

became a well-known figure in the Y-shaped building that has housed the UNESCO headquarters in Paris since 1958.¹³ Although Jan Vansina never worked directly for UNESCO, for more than thirty years he was involved with the writing and editing of the *General History of Africa*.¹⁴ So, as a result the UNESCO archives contain numerous letters of his. Indeed, the amount of material available detailing Vansina's involvement with the *General History* leads me to suggest that the archive ought to be the first port of call for any future biographer of the innovative Africanist.¹⁵

One of the most illuminating ways to research this subject is through correspondence. There are a number of boxes containing correspondence among African historians such as Jacob F. Ade-Ajayi, Adu Boahen, Ali Mazrui, Théophile Obenga and Cheikh Anta-Diop, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, among others; and between each of those historians and the various UNESCO officials who worked on the project, such as Maurice Glélé.¹⁶ As mentioned above, many of the boxes also contain correspondence, most of it in French, between Jan Vansina and Glélé or between Vansina and other members of the *General History of Africa* committee, the 39-strong so called "International Scientific Committee for the drafting of a *General History of Africa*" (hereafter ISC).

The majority of the letters in the archive deal with the various chapters written for the eight volumes. They contain comments, critiques, letters to and from authors and editors, and sometimes practical details such as where and how

¹³ Diélika Diallo, "Hampâté Bâ the Great Conciliator," *The UNESCO Courier* (January 1992).

¹⁴ Jan Vansina, *Living with Africa* (Madison WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 195–196.

¹⁵ See the commemorative contributions on Jan Vansina in *History in Africa* 45 (2018).

¹⁶ Glélé played a pivotal role in the drafting of the *General History of Africa*. He organized and coordinated the numerous seminars and meetings and took charge of the practical aspects of the process of writing the history. He often opened committee sessions on behalf of the Director General of UNESCO. He and others, such as Makaminan Makagiansar, formed the secretariat for the *General History of Africa*.

to find specific books and sources necessary for the writing of a chapter. Most valuable for the writing of a historiography of the *General History of Africa*, however, are the very sizable reading reports written by designated reviewers. First drafts of chapters or sometimes whole volumes were sent to a reading committee made of knowledgeable scholars who read and critiqued the work. The head of the reading committee then collated the various comments to create a reading report.¹⁷ Most reading committees consisted of regular contributors to the *General History of Africa*, whether editors, members of the International Scientific Committee, or authors who had contributed more than once. The reading reports are therefore invaluable not only because they contain detailed reflections on the authors' writing and historical work, but reflect too the plurality of opinions the *General History of Africa* tried to accommodate. The reports show norms of writing, as well as historiographical norms. Fortunately, the archives hold not only the final reports that were sent back to the editor, but also various individual reports on single chapters, which tend to be much more detailed than the final summary. The head of the reading report was always an ISC committee member, so the question of precisely which parts of the sometimes scathing individual criticisms on chapters and volumes eventually ended up in the final reading reports tells us a great deal about what was considered to be good scholarship. The reading reports and their various pre-productions are therefore a truly rich source.

Although most of the letters to and from Paris and various corners of the world concern the drafting and editing of the *General History*, they also contain valuable information about the everyday lives of the men – and a few women – who sent them. Adu Boahen, for instance, in a 1983 letter to Glélé describes the current food and goods crisis in Ghana. He notes that he is eagerly awaiting the next UNESCO meeting as it will give him a chance to stock up on toothpaste,

¹⁷ Jan Vansina, "UNESCO and African Historiography," *History in Africa* 20 (1993), 337–352, 339.

soap, and toilet rolls; to say nothing of a spare part for his Peugeot 505!¹⁸

Besides correspondence the archive contains various newspaper clippings concerning the *General History of Africa* as well as printed obituaries of ISC members who died while the *General History of Africa* was being drafted. Indeed, one of the boxes, CLT/CID 137, is entirely devoted to the deaths of committee members and contains a large quantity of letters of condolence, newspaper obituaries, and other reflections on the passing of eminent historians of Africa. Although some of the obituaries are to be found outside the archives, for example in newspaper archives, the box itself nevertheless functions as a miniature “book of the dead” within the *General History of Africa*. Not only does the box provide context for the deaths it contains, it also tells us how other members responded to them.¹⁹

Furthermore, the archival material also consists of information about finances, CV’s of potential authors, planning for the publication of the volumes and of course, manuscripts. Highly interesting too are the lists Glélé produced of “the geographical spread” of authors. Glélé kept track of authors’ nationalities and, most importantly, kept track of whether the proportion of African authors vis-à-vis European and American authors followed protocol. The ISC had made it clear from the beginning that the majority of authors had to be African or of African descent, which was in line with UNESCO ideology which had come to see diversity as an inherently good thing. Therefore the lists Glélé made are themselves important archival material, detailing the minutiae of the *General History of Africa*.

¹⁸ UNESCO Archives in Paris, CC CSP 36, Professor A.A. Boahen to Mr. Maurice Glélé, 21 March 1983.

¹⁹ Obituaries are an interesting scholarly genre in themselves. They may be used to study conventions and accepted standards within a discipline or field of history. See, for instance: Anna Echterhölter, *Schattengefächte: Genealogische Praktiken in Nachrufen auf Naturwissenschaftler (1710–1860)* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2012), 10, 20–21.

A Network of Intellectuals; From Paris to Ibadan

Most strikingly perhaps, the availability of so much correspondence and debate among historians of Africa living in various corners of the globe, allows us to trace an international network of African scholarship. With these papers and specifically the vast amount of correspondence we can reconstruct a chain of information, although perhaps the absence of response and exchange is equally telling. Like most archival collections of letters, what is missing has the potential to be more revealing than what is there. Where are the other halves of the correspondence that UNESCO keeps?

The geographical dispersion of correspondence and other documents should be the starting point of any research concerning a project as large as the *General History of Africa*, which spans three decades, four continents and involved more than three hundred different people, many of whom travelled extensively. Moreover, the *General History* was written during a period of postcolonial state formation, with attendant enormous uncertainty. It follows that it is important to visit and read various archives and collections in order to reconstruct a narrative that will be mindful of the disruption experienced by the postcolonial actors who wrote history at the time.

In another archival research report for this journal Luise White wrote that scholars of the postcolonial should “take the mess as their starting point.” White’s account of what she calls a hodgepodge of historiography persuades us to incorporate the reality of postcolonial states and lives into our own historiography, which should be constructed as a “bricolage.”²⁰ Although the geographical location of materials in the *General History* is relatively easy to construct, there is too a somewhat disorganized but eclectic aspect to the history of the project itself. The location is not always obvious of material showing how the *General History* functioned and what practices were a part of it. Much of the information about

²⁰ Luise White, “Hodgepodge Historiography: Documents, Itineraries, and the Absence of Archives,” *History in Africa* 42 (2015), 309–318, 313–317.

everyday and sometimes seemingly unimportant decisions is to be found literally in the margins – of letters, for instance, or reports. Nor is it obvious in which specific archive particular materials might be.

One such archive that works in concert with the UNESCO *General History of Africa* collection is the private library and collection of the late Jacob F. Ade-Ajayi, the editor of volume VII of the *General History of Africa*. Ade-Ajayi died in 2014 but spent most of his working life connected to the university of Ibadan and it is there that his private collection is now kept. The archive and library are maintained by the Jadeas Trust, which also lends its name to the library building. The Jadeas Trust is a family-directed foundation originally established by J.F. Ade-Ajayi and his wife, Christie Ade-Ajayi, the archive and library being actually in their family home. In July and August 2018 I was lucky enough to spend a goodly time going through the material there and was privileged to experience the hospitality of the Ade-Ajayi family. That was especially remarkable as I found myself simultaneously reading about the family's hospitality in letters and obituaries I came across in the archive!

The library is open to everyone and is used extensively by Ibadan history students and faculty, to whom it provides not only somewhere to work but also access to rare books. As a mark of respect the late professor's office and his own books there have been kept largely untouched; the library holds a rich collection of books of African history, especially that of Nigeria, as well as a number of shelves devoted entirely to African political thought.²¹ The whole space amounts to a source for anyone interested in the life and work of Ade-Ajayi and, moreover, for anyone interested in the everyday activity of African history, the doings of historians. Moreover, there is a mountain of information about the performance of intellectualism in this specific context. The presence or absence of books provide clues to the intellectual climate Ade-Ajayi knew.

Noteworthy too is that the archival collection is absolutely vast. Any future

²¹ The library also holds an extensive collection of journals, including issues of *History in Africa*. And so the circle is completed...

biographer of Ade-Ajayi will find records of the private lives of Christie and Jacob Festus Ade-Ajayi, and those of their children, as well as ample information concerning Jacob Ade-Ajayi's professional activity. There is also ample material on Ajayi's other work for UNESCO and as a professor at both Ibadan and Lagos universities. For example, I found a remarkable box containing conference records from the first international congress, in 1962, of Africanists in Accra and there is surely more to be found in this three-room archive in Ibadan.

The archival material that I saw filled some of the gaps I had become aware of in Paris a year and a half earlier. I was able to trace the other sides of some of the correspondence, as well as exchanges that I had not yet seen, between Ade-Ajayi and Boahen. I found reading reports that Ajayi had directed, including detailed and somewhat politically charged comments from Abeodu Bowen Jones, who was one of the few women working on the project. As a result of my investigations in the UNESCO archive, the metropole of the *General History* project, and the Ibadan archive, I was able to reconstruct how Bowen, perhaps not coincidentally, has more or less disappeared, along with her comments, from the narrative. In fact, I realized she had gone missing from the official archival depot of the project, obviously suggesting one way in which she had been marginalized. It is in this reconstruction of that kind that the "bricolage" nature of archival work becomes apparent. The Ibadan archive therefore enabled me to add some of the missing pieces of the puzzle to my own research.

The UNESCO collection on the *General History of Africa* then, seems to rise to the next level when combined with other, scattered, archives. It is not at all unlikely that more private archives belonging to the great African historians of Ade-Ajayi's generation are similarly spread across Africa and elsewhere. Indeed, the Jan Vansina papers are located at Northwestern University and papers pertaining to Ali Mazrui are at the University of Michigan. What other missing pieces are to be found there? In a way the project on the *General History* and, more generally, African history, has been dispersed artificially through separate collections by

individuals. If we combine them, however, these archives form a network of individuals and universities spanning Africa and further. In the process of reconstructing, we learn about the materiality and practicality of African history in the immediate postcolonial era.

References

Amrith, Sunil, and Glenda Sluga, “New Histories of the United Nations,” *Journal of World History* 19–3 (2008), 251–274.

Diallo, Diélika, “Hampâté Bâ the Great Conciliator,” *The UNESCO Courier* (January 1992).

Echterhölter, anna, *Schattengefächte: Genealogische Praktiken in Nachrufen auf Naturwissenschaftler (1710–1860)* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2012).

Luard, Evan, *A History of the United Nations*, volume 2 (*The Age of Decolonization, 1955–1965*) (London: MacMillan, 1989).

Maurel, Chloé, “L’histoire générale de l’Afrique de l’UNESCO. Un projet coopération intellectuelle transnationale d’esprit afro-centré (1964–1999),” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 54 (2014), 715–737.

Meskel, Lynn, *A Future in Ruins. UNESCO, World Heritage and the Dream of Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Ogot, Bethwell, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time* (Kisumu: Ayange Press Limited, 2003).

Tirmizi, Sayyid Akbarali Ibrahimali, *Indian Sources for African History* (Delhi: International Writers Emporium/UNESCO, 1988).

Valderrama, Fernando, *A History of UNESCO* (Paris: UNESCO, 1995).

Vansina, Jan, “UNESCO and African Historiography,” *History in Africa* 20 (1993), 337–352.

-----, *Living with Africa* (Madison WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).

White, Luise, “Hodgepodge Historiography: Documents, Itineraries, and the Absence of Archives,” *History in Africa* 42 (2015), 309–318.